DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 260 866 RC 015 404

AUTHOR	Gale, Nancy
TITLE	Child Sexual Abuse in Native American Communities.
INSTITUTION	National American Indian Court Judges Association.
SPONS AGENCY	Children's Bureau (DHHS/OHS), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	Aug 85
NOTE	16p.
AVAILABLE FROM	National Indian Law Library, 1506 Broadway, Boulder, CO 80302 (Copies can be ordered, for mailing costs).
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*American Indians; *Child Abuse; Child Advocacy; Children; Child Welfare; Community Resources; *Community Role; Cultural Differences; Incidence; Legal Responsibility; *Prevention; *Sexual Abuse; Social Differences; *Social Influences; Social Services; Tribes

ABSTRACT

Information on causes and warning signs of child sexual abuse, examples of treatment, and prevention resources are presented in this guide which highlights cultural differences in American Indian communities that may influence the occurrence and prevention of child sexual abuse. The guide begins by stating that from the limited statistics available, American Indian communities experience child sexual abuse at approximatley the same rate as non-Indian communities. A question-answer format provides a definition of child sexual abuse, characteristics of sexual offenders and children at-risk for abuse, and behaviors that can indicate abuse. The remainder of the guide, stressing community responsiblity, outlines nine steps for communities to take in the prevention of child sexual abuse. Prevention measures include community education, personal safety curriculum in schools, workable reporting mechanisms, interagency cooperation, and training for professionals. Special problems and resources when sexual abuse occurs in Native American communities are summarized. Problems include distrust of the legal and social agencies intended to help and problems of legal jurisdiction which make both services and prosecution difficult to obtain. Resources include the influence of tribal leaders and traditional practices, such as the talking circle, for problem solving among tribal members. (JHZ)

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Child Sexual Abuse in Native American Communities

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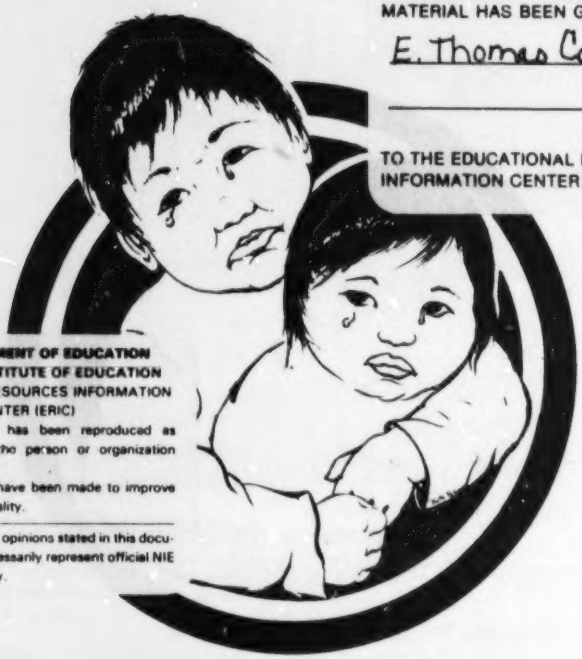

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RC015404

Some facts about the occurrence of sexual abuse of American Indian children; information on causes and warning signs; and examples of treatment and prevention resources.

As part of its Linkages *project to disseminate information on topics considered vital to the welfare of American Indian children, the National American Indian Court Judges Association offers this brochure on the subject of sexual abuse of children. It is hoped that the information provided will increase awareness and understanding of the problem and contribute to prevention and intervention efforts.*

National American Indian Court Judges Association
1000 Connecticut Avenue, NW #401
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 296-0685

Child Sexual Abuse in Native American Communities

In the last several years, child sexual abuse has become an issue of major concern throughout the United States. The statistics are startling.

Recent data suggests that, nationally, *at least* one out of every four girls, and one of every six to eight boys, are sexually molested by age 18. What's more, the facts show that more than 85 percent of the children identified as sexually abused are abused on a reoccurring basis, by someone known to them.

American Indian communities are not exempt from the problem of child sexual abuse. The limited statistics available indicate that American Indian communities experience child sexual abuse at approximately the same rate as do non-Indian communities.

With the idea that child sexual abuse can best be prevented through knowledge and awareness, the following pages provide answers to questions often asked about the subject.

WHAT IS CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE?

Child sexual abuse is a crime which, in the general population, falls within the province of the states. American Indian tribes, therefore, have the option of taking the child sexual abuse definitions provided by their respective states or they may, in order to satisfy their own community and law enforcement standards, create definitions within their tribal codes.

At present, the great majority of tribal codes do not define child sexual abuse but, as tribes continue to work toward establishing child protection jurisdiction, such definitions will become more common and legal prosecution and treatment of Indian child sexual cases within the tribal context will be made a lot easier.

TYPES OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

	NON-CONTACT: Does not involve touching	• Obscene calls • Jokes • Peeping • Sexual propositions • Child pornography • Forcing child to watch sexual act or sexual violence
CONTACT: Involves some kind of touching	MANIPULATIVE: Touching which appears non-hostile and which has been psychologically, rather than forcefully, imposed on child	• Unwanted hugs, kisses • Unwanted pinching, tickling • French kissing • Sexual positioning for photos • Handling genitals • Masturbation • Mouth to genital contact
	AGGRESSIVE: Sexual activity in which a child is physically forced to participate	• Oral rape • Vaginal rape • Anal rape • Sexual bondage • Sexual maiming

Most children who are sexually abused will, over time, experience more than one, and sometimes *all*, types of the abuse shown on the chart. The abuse will often begin with non-contact advances such as those listed in the upper right hand block and progress downward through the chart to subject the child to behaviors which involve increasingly more contact and greater violation.

In the meantime, sexual abuse of Indian children can be simplistically defined as a situation in which an adult "uses" a child to satisfy a sexual need of the adult.

This abuse can take many forms. It may, but usually does not, involve physical force. It may involve various degrees and kinds of physical contact and touching. Or it may be totally non-contact in nature. Sexual abuse may be forced upon the child through *aggression* or it may be imposed through psychological *manipulation.* Whatever the case, the experience for the child is confusing, exploitative, age-inappropriate and frightening.

HOW DOES CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE HAPPEN?

Apart from the one-time sexual encounter with a stranger (such experiences account for only 5-10 percent of child sexual abuse), almost all child sexual abuse develops gradually with the offender slowly grooming, or preparing, the child.

Trust and time are used by the offender. Once abuse has occurred, the child feels responsibility, often reasoning that he/she is guilty because "I participated." The offender uses threats (often subtle) to silence the child and the child is manipulated into secrecy. The offender may say: "If you tell your mother, you will make her unhappy." "You will cause me to be sent away if you tell." "You'll get in trouble if you tell." The child is torn by wanting to stop what is happening and not wanting something bad to happen to himself, the family or the offender.

WHO COMMITS SEXUAL ABUSE OF CHILDREN?

In 9 out of 10 cases, a child is sexually abused by someone he or she knows. The abuser often has caretaking responsibilities for the child and is a person the child has been taught to trust. It appears that 35 percent of sexually abused children suffer from incest; that is, they are abused by family members.

By common definition, the offender need not be an adult, but is at least four years older than the child being abused. From currently available statistics, it appears that ninety percent of the time, the abuser is a male.

There are no clear explanations as to why any specific individual becomes a sexual offender, or a victim, while another does not. But it is possible to identify attitudes, experiences and situations which place individuals at-risk.

The child sexual abuser clearly has some sort of sexual attraction for children, although he/she may also have adult sexual partners. Still, it appears that other needs, in addition to sexual desires, turn the offender to

the child. These may include the need to feel more sexually "able" or just to feel needed or liked.

When an individual exhibits the characteristics described above, he/she tends to be at-risk for committing child sexual abuse. This tendency, some suggest, is fueled by any additional situation which might make the at-risk person feel powerless. The additional stress created by feeling powerless further pushes the at-risk individual toward his child victim in an attempt to gain some feeling of control over life.

Finally, the individual who commits child sexual abuse often comes from a background which includes some sort of role model for abuse. Indeed, it appears that much of a child sexual offender's deviant behavior is learned.

None of these "explanations" excuses the actions of the sexual offender. The offender must be held fully responsible for the abuse he/she perpetrates.

ARE CERTAIN KINDS OF FAMILIES OR CHILDREN MORE AT-RISK FOR ABUSE?

Child sexual abuse happens to all kinds of families and children. It happens in rich families, poor families, Anglo families, Indian families. It happens in cities and on reservations.

But there are some factors which place certain families more at-risk than others. These higher risk families include those which are geographically or socially isolated, those in which there is special stress or dysfunction and those in which there are unrealistic expectations, rigid roles, poor communications, alcoholism, and/or any type of violence.

An especially high risk factor is a family history of previous sexual abuse. Child sexual abuse is often cyclical with abused children developing attitudes and expectations which sometimes cause them to see such abuse as normal. As adults, then, abused children have a higher risk of themselves abusing others or of tolerating abuse since it seems simply to be "the way things are."

DO SOCIETY'S ATTITUDES CONTRIBUTE TO CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE?

People who work with child sexual abuse offenders and victims suggest that there are cultural elements in society which help to set the stage for child sexual abuse.

For example, many child rearing concepts teach children to be submissive and unquestioning of adult authority. Prevalent sexist and racist attitudes can devalue young girls and boys and teach them to accept exploitation. If, additionally, a child suffers low self esteem or feels devalued for

other reasons, submission and subservience may become even more pronounced. These characteristics increase a child's risk for victimization.

In addition, the secrecy which many communities award sexual topics perpetuates the problem of child sexual abuse. Indeed, the child victim may not "know" that what he/she is experiencing is out of the ordinary; or, if he does know, he may have well-learned that talking about *any* sexual subject is considered taboo. This attitude of secrecy isolates the victim, protects the abuser and perpetuates the abuse.

And finally, many families and communities are currently in a severe state of dysfunction. In many American Indian communities, for example, the extended family has broken down and traditional child-rearing practices no longer operate. A void exists which leaves both offenders and victims without guidelines by which they may measure the appropriateness of their behavior. It also leaves both without corrective resources to which they may turn.

As with any population, the occurrence of child sexual abuse in American Indian communities does *not* indicate that it is culturally sanctioned. Native Americans place high value on children and find the occurrence of child sexual abuse to be damaging, disgraceful and frightening.

ARE THERE SPECIAL PROBLEMS/RESOURCES WHEN SEXUAL ABUSE OCCURS IN NATIVE AMERICAN COMMUNITIES?

Native American communities seem to experience child sexual abuse at about the same rate as does the general population. But, yes, there are differences when abuse occurs in an Indian community. These differences can be both helpful and hindering.

One primary difference is that, in an Indian community, almost everyone knows everyone and most people are related in one way or another. On the negative side, this can foster denial and result in protection of the offender. On the other hand, there are few secrets in an Indian community, a fact which can help identify acts of sexual abuse. In addition, the closeness of the community can provide important support to the victim and can provide a vigilance which prohibits repetition of the abuse.

A special problem which many Native Americans face is the problem of getting appropriate legal and social services to any specific child sexual abuse case. This situation is caused by two primary factors.

First, because of past experiences in which they have been treated less than justly, many Indian people distrust the very legal, law enforcement and social authorities which are best equipped to help. Secondly, because of

complicated questions of legal jurisdiction, it is often not clear what governmental entity actually has responsibility for cases which occur on a reservation. Difficulties in obtaining proper services and prosecution result.

In an attempt to solve these problems, some tribes have undertaken efforts to develop inter-governmental agreements with surrounding jurisdictions and agencies. These agreements help to establish cooperative relations and outline responsibilities and procedures for handling Indian child sexual abuse cases.

There are also special resources within Indian communities. For example, a tribal elder who is committed to the need for developing a sexual abuse prevention and treatment program can be tremendously effective in developing community support. A traditional talking circle, in which tribal members meet to share their thoughts on a particular subject in an atmosphere of trust and acceptance, can serve as a means through which a community can identify its standards concerning the protection of children. A "closed" talking circle, in which participants agree to keep the ideas expressed confidential, can provide a "safe" environment in which sexual abuse victims can find support. Or, when a legal sanction against an offender is unavailable, the tribal council may perhaps choose to use its traditional right to discharge the offender from the community.

WHAT CLUES MAY INDICATE THAT A CHILD IS BEING SEXUALLY ABUSED?

Usually, the child who is sexually abused will not clearly speak out and tell what is happening to him/her. And the indirect signals which a sexually abused child gives are often similar or identical to the signals given for other emotional traumas.

Nonetheless, there are a number of indicators which should alert us to, at least, the possibility of sexual abuse. These include: regressive behavior, withdrawal, abrupt behavior changes, new or excessive phobias, aggressive behavior, nightmares, depression, self-destructive behavior, school problems, alienation from family members, and running away.

Special attention should be given to the possibility of sexual abuse when a child shows excessive interest in the genitals, demonstrates sexual knowledge beyond what is appropriate for his/her age, is unwilling to dress down for P.E., exhibits bruises or irritations around the genital areas, demonstrates sexually seductive behavior, acts out sexually aggressive behavior, is promiscuous or becomes involved in prostitution.

If a child specifically makes statements that he/she is experiencing sexual abuse, the charge should be immediately and carefully investigated.

Professionals who work with sexually abused children believe children almost never lie about being sexually abused.

WHAT IMPACT DOES SEXUAL ABUSE HAVE ON THE CHILD VICTIM?

Long-term impacts of sexual abuse will vary depending upon case specifics. The type of assault, the period of time involved, the child's interpretation of events, what happened when the abuse became known, and the treatment provided all influence the effect on the child. The most important determinant of the degree of damage appears to be *who* the abuser was. It seems the closer the relationship between the child and the abuser, the greater the damage. The damage, however, is always less if the child, upon disclosure, is believed and supported by other family members.

Many messages are transmitted to the sexually abused child. First, when the abuse is not recognized and stopped, the child feels isolated. Alone with the situation, the child reasons that the abuse must be "deserved": that he/she is not worthy of anything better. His/her self image drops and the child comes to feel powerless. These feelings often lead the abused child to do poorly in school, to be delinquent and/or to turn to alcohol, drugs, suicide or even to inflicting sexual abuse on others.

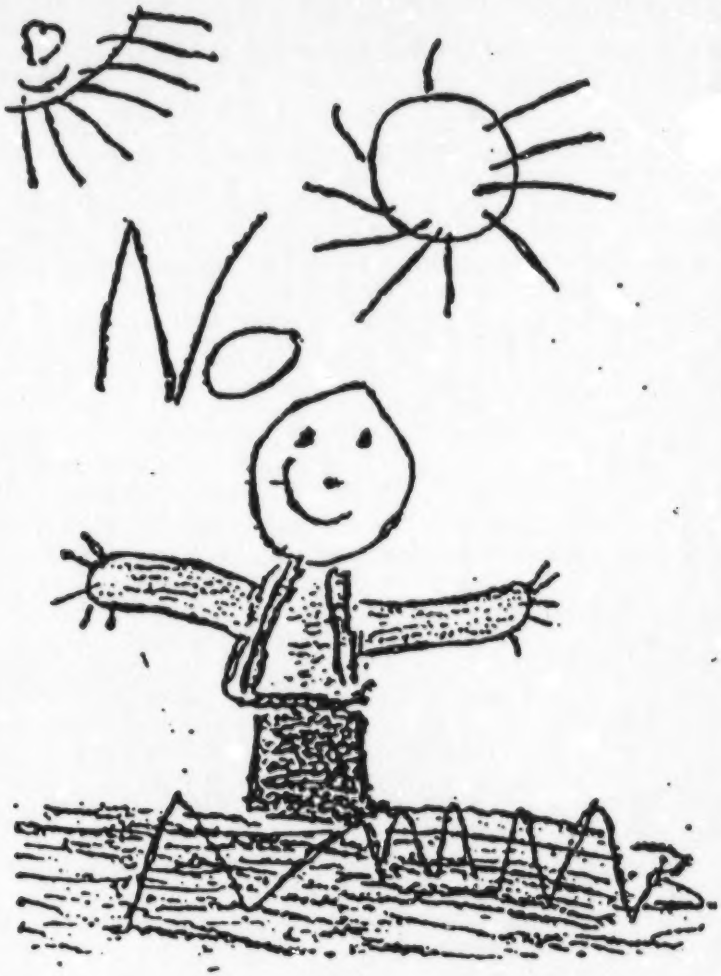
Sexually abused children have a high risk of growing into adults who cannot set appropriate boundaries for themselves. They often develop an inability to trust anyone and often have difficulty in maintaining or cultivating long-lasting personal relationships. Often their youthful abuse of drugs, alcohol and even food turns into adult addictions or disorders. Sexually abused children also have a higher than average risk for prostitution.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE IF A CHILD REPORTS BEING SEXUALLY ABUSED?

It is very hard for a child to "tell" that he/she is being sexually abused. Almost always, the person he first tells is a person from the regular world around him, a person who is *not* professionally experienced in handling sexual abuse cases.

A child's first need after disclosing is to know that he/she will be believed, that he will not be blamed and that he will be protected. The adult to whom the child has chosen to talk can help most by remembering these guidelines.

- Stay calm. This will help calm the child and assure him/her that it is good that he told and that he will be listened to.
- Take the child to a quiet, safe place and allow him/her to talk. Do not



A happier world, as drawn by a 6-year old sexual abuse victim currently in therapy.

probe for details. Statements like "I know it must be scary for you" or "I'm here to listen" will encourage the child to talk without feeling pressured.

- Tell the child that his/her situation is not unique, that this has happened to other children, and that he is still likable. Tell him there are people who will help and support him.
- Don't judge the offender or the offense. Children are often protective of those who abuse them.
- Report the disclosure immediately to tribal or state officials.
- Let the child know what will be happening. Not knowing is scary. If you don't know what will happen, ask authorities to explain the process to you so you can tell the child.
- Find someone who can help you with *your* feelings. Anyone who is confided in by a child about such a serious matter will likely need support handling the feelings that may arise for him/herself.

Ideally, when a case of child sexual abuse is reported to authorities, a responsible information gathering process will begin immediately. Wherever possible, this should be conducted by an individual trained specifically in working with sexual abuse cases and with children. When the child is Indian, the interviewer must also be culturally sensitive. Questioning the appropriateness of an interviewer is often necessary and, for the child's sake, should be done *before* the interview.

Any professional who interviews a child about possible sexual abuse will follow some simple guidelines. First, the interviewer will be careful not to show reaction or judgement concerning what is described. He or she will refer to body parts and sexual acts in the terms which the child uses, and will not exhibit distaste or shock. Moral statements will be avoided.

The child will be encouraged to feel safe in expressing his/her feelings, but the interviewer should be honest and let the child know that there is certain information that cannot be kept secret: that he/she will have to tell other authorities that the child has been hurt, so that the hurting can be stopped.

Anatomically correct dolls may be used when children between the ages of 2 and 13 are being interviewed. Through these dolls, which are available with Native American coloring, features and clothing*, a child can describe more exactly what he/she has experienced.

**Anatomically correct Native American dolls are available through an increasing number of sources. These sources include: Analeka Industries, Box 141, West Linn, OR 97068; Pat Cowan, c/o Providence Sexual Assault Center, Box 1067, Everett, WA 98206; and Tami Lucas, 5177 Old Redwood Hwy # 7, Santa Rosa, CA 95401.*

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE CHILD ONCE HIS/HER ABUSE IS KNOWN?

In any case where a child has been—or is being—sexually abused, the well-being of that child is the first concern. His/her immediate safety must be assured. Where separation is necessary, it is almost always less traumatic to the child to remove the offender rather than the child. Whether the child is removed or not, he/she must be surrounded by people who will support him and believe his story.

Appropriate treatment for the sexually abused child must be planned according to case specifics. Where an Indian child is involved, members of the extended family can often be beneficially brought into the therapy. (These people may also need attention, but their issues must remain separate from the child's.)

Whatever therapy is chosen, efforts should be made to present it in a way which is harmonious with the child's cultural background. Native American children tend not to be very verbal so "talking therapy" is usually not very successful. Allowing the Indian child to occupy his/her hands with either play or art materials usually makes him more comfortable and provides a way through which feelings may be expressed.

WHAT IMPACT DOES CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE HAVE ON A COMMUNITY?

When children are sexually abused, the community itself suffers. Unrecognized and untreated child victims often grow up to be dysfunctional adults. Unchecked sexual abuse tends to be repeated generation after generation involving more and more people as time goes by.

Sexual abuse victims have poor self images and low expectations. They are used to being victimized and see victimization as a fact of life. The frame of mind created by sexual abuse perpetuates the existence of alcoholism, drug abuse, unemployment and violence in the community.

WHAT CAN A COMMUNITY DO TO STOP THE SEXUAL ABUSE OF CHILDREN?

Child sexual abuse is a community problem and, therefore, a community responsibility. Steps which a community can take include:

1. The community must make a public decision and statement that children have rights, that sexual abuse of children is not acceptable, and that it will not be tolerated.

2. The community must publicly admit that child sexual abuse does exist and can happen to its children. Statements by respected community members (elders, council members, religious leaders) providing personal testimony of abuse can be extremely effective in forcing a community to recognize that, yes, it does happen here.

3. An effort to educate adult and child community members about sexual abuse must be undertaken. Posters and educational materials displayed in tribal buildings, spot radio announcements, and discussions on council agendas are simple means of informing community members.

   A personal safety curriculum in schools can effectively reach children. Children should be taught:

   - *No one deserves to be abused.*
   - *Your body is your own: respect it.*
   - *You can say "No."*
   - *Talking about your feelings is important: tell*
   - *Abuse is not your fault.*
   - *You will be believed.*
   - *Help is available: you are not alone.*

4. Workable reporting mechanisms must be established. The community should demand that reliable reporting mechanisms be established whereby child sexual abuse will be adequately and fully reported to the appropriate child protection and/or law enforcement agency. The community should monitor this system to assure its proper functioning.

5. Effective systems must be available for protecting and treating child abuse victims. Multiple resources, pooled from different agencies, are almost always required. Coordination is essential.

   The community has a right to know what coordinating policies and procedures will be used. If these seem inappropriate or unworkable, changes are in order. Where necessary, cooperative agreements may need to be developed between agencies.

6. The community must assume a monitoring role to force accountability. The community, or its monitoring representative, must be aware of what actions professionals should properly take in investigating, prosecuting and treating child abuse cases and must insist that these actions be taken. Adequate training for law enforcement, social service and court personnel should be demanded to assure that personnel are properly equipped

to work sensitively and effectively with victims, families and offenders according to the customs and values of the Indian community.

7. The community must demand proper prosecution and handling of offenders by the appropriate jurisdiction. The development of an intergovernmental agreement outlining prosecution responsibilities and cooperation should be considered.

8. The community can provide public support to child victims through acknowledging the child's experience and reinforcing the message that the child is not to blame. Responsibility for the abuse should always be placed on the offender.

9. Indian communities may want to revitalize old traditions in dealing with sexual abuse. Banishment and various healing ceremonies can serve to protect the community's children and make them stronger while giving the offender the message that what he/she has done will not be tolerated.

This brochure was published by the *Linkages* project of the National American Indian Court Judges Association with funds from the Children's Bureau, Administration for Children, Youth and Families, Office of Human Development Services, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Hector Sanchez was the HHS Project Officer.

The text was written by *Linkages* Editor Nancy Gale based primarily on interviews with Cheryl Henderson Peters, Director of the Sexual Abuse Prevention and Treatment program of the Skokomish Tribe, Shelton, Washington and with social service staff from the Skokomish, Squaxin Island, and Quinault Nations in Washington State. Ms. Peters and Louise Zokan delos Reyes, Child Welfare Specialist for the Bureau of Indian Affairs' Division of Social Services, reviewed and helped edit the material.

The children in the cover illustration are drawn by Ruth Peters of Olympia, Washington.

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August 1985